

To: Montgomery County DHCA
From: Zorayda Moreira-Smith, Staff Attorney, CASA de Maryland, Inc.
Date: December 1, 2011
Re: Montgomery County Housing Policy Testimony

Good Evening My name is Zorayda Moreira-Smith and I am here on behalf of CASA de Maryland. I am a staff attorney and I work with residents from Long Branch, Silver Spring. Specifically, I work with residents that reside in Flower Branch, Pine Ridge, Good Acre, and Foxhall Apartments along Piney Branch Road, between Flower Avenue and University Boulevard. CASA has worked in the Long Branch community for several years and we are dedicated to its long-term affordability.

Long Branch is among the county's most diverse communities. This community represents a large concentration of immigrants from Central America, South America, Asia, and Africa. Hispanics are one of the larger groups. Today, this is a vibrant multi-cultural community with established neighborhoods. Many residents in this area that I work with have told me that they have lived here for several years and want to continue living here.

CASA has three recommendations for the 2012 Housing Policy:

1. Preserve Affordable Housing,
2. Create Affordable Housing, and
3. Improve Code Enforcement.

First, preservation of affordable housing. Long Branch residents are vulnerable to rapidly increasing rents that will likely accompany the construction of the Purple Line and the subsequent development. The estimated 2007 median household income in Long Branch was \$58, 990 compared to \$96, 476 County-wide. At this time, residents report that they have a difficult time paying their rent. As the County is aware, the Purple Line is expected to be built in the near future. In the proposal, two stations are expected to be built in the Long Branch community. The community supports the construction of the new transit system so long as it does not force them out of their homes. Residents are worried that rents will rapidly increase-resulting to an amount that is no longer affordable to them and they having to move away from this area. Experience shows that development will accompany the construction of the Purple Line.

Community residents have raised these concerns several times. Montgomery County's Planning Department is aware of the concerns. The Long Branch Sector Plan issued preliminary recommendations which reported that through observations, field work, and discussions with residents, they learned that residents were concerned with the threat to affordable housing.



Second, creation of affordable housing. Due to market pressure and the expected Purple Line, the County must take leadership and use authority in relation to affordable housing. The County is nationally known for its development of progressive and effective affordable housing programs, however, it needs to do more. The County's Affordable Housing Task Force concluded that the existing programs do not sufficiently address the existing affordable housing crisis. The Task Force further stated that the lack of affordable housing in this County has reached catastrophic proportions. We recommend that one of the objectives of the County to be to "Increase Affordable housing." Furthermore, we recommend that the County work with the Planning Commission and the County Council to ensure that this objective of increasing affordable housing be included in every Sector and Master Plan.

Third, improvement in Housing Code Enforcement. Code Enforcement is charged with the responsibility to maintain and preserve the quality of life in our neighborhoods and housing stock. Inspections are triggered by various manners-such as, complaints or tri-annual inspection. It is my experience that most tenants do not know about Code Enforcement and their right to make a complaint. Many tenants never complain to the County because of lack of knowledge and fear of retaliation. Therefore, the tri-annual inspection is critical to ensure that apartments are habitable and should be conducted in a thorough manner. Recently, Code Enforcement conducted an apartment-wide inspection in one of the apartments that I work with. Tenants were unaware of the inspection and did not receive notice of the results of the inspection. Unfortunately, despite the violations that were cited and then allegedly remedied, tenants reported that they had problems in their apartment. Several tenants expressed disappointment with the code enforcement inspection claiming that it was merely cursory. We recommend that tenants should be adequately informed of apartment-wide inspections and should also receive the list of violations that are found in their apartment that the landlord is cited for. Tenants should be given the opportunity to inform the inspector of other violations that they believe they may have. Furthermore, we recommend more frequent apartment-wide inspections for apartment buildings with ongoing complaints.

In conclusion, CASA is asking that the County take leadership and be proactive to ensure equitable treatment for all county residents. We recommend preservation of affordable housing, creation of affordable housing, and improvement in housing code enforcement. Thank you.

